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HOW ROCKING WAS ROLLAPADU!

Special Report – BSAP Trip to Rollapadu, 29th – 31st August 2014

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Bonelli's Eagle (Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

We unanimously declared the Bonelli's Eagle as our hero at Rollapadu Wild Life Sanctuary. A handsome bold predator which dwarfed not only the white fence post it was sitting on, but also the expansive grassland. Feathers on its barrel-like chest and dark brown back ruffled in the wind, but it sat unmindful, completely still, looking like the King of all it surveyed. In control.

This crag nester's Latin name is *Hieraaetus fasciatus*. *Hierax* is Greek for hawk, *aetos* is an eagle and *fascia* is band or stripe - reference to the broad dark terminal band to the pale greyish tail. It is named after Professor Franco Andrea Bonelli, Italian naturalist, collector and author.

We first laid our eyes on the eagle while it was perched on a tree. We watched in fascination to our heart's content, admiring its proud bearing. After quite a while, it lifted itself straight up into the air, glided towards the sanctuary fence and settled on a post for a long time.

Photo: Gowthama Poladasu

As you will see, the eagle turned out to be the smarter one. After having had our fill of staring at it, we were about to head back to the guest house when it suddenly took off from the post. We saw something fawn-coloured scurrying hither and thither below.

Photo: Gowthama Poladasu

Stunned were we, when we realised, pretty late in the day, that the Bonelli's had marked a lone Blackbuck (*Antilope cervicapra)* fawn and was keeping a close watch from its observation post. It had already planned its hunt and had also written the fawn's death sentence. Of course, we didn't know this till the first of the air-to-surface swooping attacks began. Round one to the Bonelli's.

Photo: Gowthama Poladasu

We need to rewind a little here, to the time when our cars braked to allow a hundred-strong herd of Blackbuck to leap and lunge magnificently across our path on the grassland expanse. We understood in hindsight that the herd hurriedly crossed over in panic on seeing the hunter Bonelli. A little fawn that was not fast enough was left behind and the hungry Bonelli's ticked him on his lunch menu. What happens in the wild if you are not fast enough? You get eaten. This dictum of the wild came true right before our eyes. Whether we liked it or not, the curtains lifted on Nature's theatre and, figuratively speaking, we watched the hunt and the subsequent kill from dress circle seats.

Photo: Gowthama Poladasu

The hunt began. The hunter chased the frightened fawn several times, pecking at it, grabbing with its sharp, powerful talons and deadly hooked beak, whose preliminary function is to tear flesh. Whenever the now-terrified fawn stood still, unable to find an escape route, the Bonelli's perched too, looking almost indifferent - but whenever the fawn tried to run, it chased the desperate and directionless fawn around in futile circles. The sight of the Bonelli's huge wingspan as it rose and swooped was pretty unsettling to us humans. Through this prism, we could gauge the extent of the hunted fawn's terror.

The Bonelli's soon succeeded in exhausting the fawn - it was itself exhausted with the umpteen attacking swoops. At this juncture it seemed as though the tired fawn was slowly giving up its attempts at escape. It was now time for the inevitable - the death knell was sounded.

Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma

Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma

In one last fell swoop, the Bonelli's finally overpowered and toppled the fawn, and dug in its talons, cutting off escape forever. There it sat upon the still-struggling fawn and did not let go for quite a while. The fawn was pinned flat on the ground in a deadly grip.

Photo: Gowthama Poladasu

The not-so-short grass blocked our view of the struggle, but once we saw the fawn's legs go up in the air, probably when it tried to save itself from the attacking talons by rolling its body around. That was the last time we saw the fawn alive. Our hearts were numb when we saw the Bonelli's bend its head down and begin tearing flesh while the fawn was still alive. It must have begun tearing around the flanks first, because when we saw the kill the next day, the throat and neck upwards were untouched but the rest of the body was cleared of flesh right up to the tail.

Photo: Gowthama Poladasu

The Post Mortem report of the fawn would have read thus:

Species: Blackbuck fawn
Gender: Unidentifiable owing to lack of evidence, as most parts of the rump were eaten away
Age: Not more than two months
Injuries: Innards torn out, hollow right from shoulder to rump
Broken: All ribs, sternum, 1 front leg and 1 hind leg
Cause of Death: Extreme shock and haemorrhage

At the end of the hunt, one question niggled. Why we do we humans like watching a hunt? It is a primordial instinct because man was originally a hunter, says one of my birder pals. Although modern man has stopped being a hunter-gatherer, the original brain wiring that has come down through billions of years has rendered us compulsive spectators of hunts.

While pondering on the subject, I recalled a Telugu movie dialogue. This is how it went: "When we watch a lion kill a deer, we desperately want the deer to escape. Not because we feel sorry for the deer - it is actually because we hate the lion's guts." Another school of thought, this.

Another observation I made was how most of us cannot stop ourselves from anthropomorphizing. While the hunt was on, compassion overflowed in the form of statements like "Poor fawn! Where is the mother? Isn't she supposed to save it?" Pat came the reply from another, "Well...let us stop pinning responsibility wholly on the mother always. Pray where is the father in a crisis like this?"

When the fawn got separated from the herd, a couple of male Blackbucks were also left behind. Some of us were literally willing the male Blackbucks to scare off the Bonelli's and save what we called the "poor fawn"!

There is a tendency among humans to attribute human characteristics to animals. We are simply applying facets we are familiar with, like emotions, to help us understand the environs that we share with the animals. Maybe it's easier to attribute emotion to an animal event (on which we have little control) than to study or research animal behaviour. As someone somewhere once said, "Anthropomorphizing is the point at which human curiosity meets human laziness".

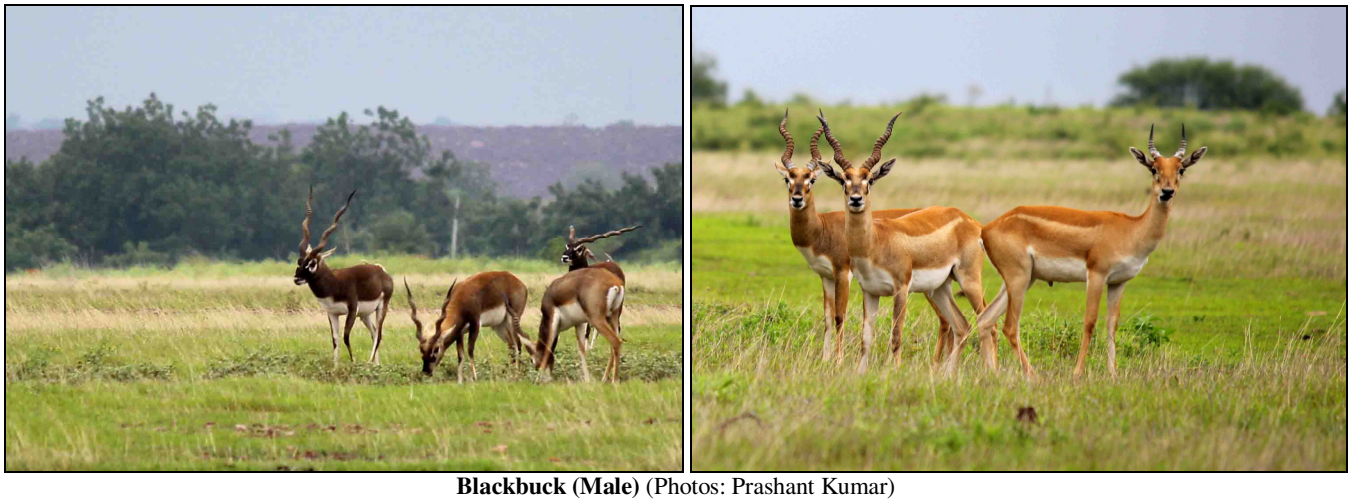
Photo: Sharada Annamaraju

Now coming to the celebrity bird of Rollapadu. Our group actually went minus a Great Indian Bustard-sighting agenda. Our collective single-minded focus was to enjoy the journey. As it happened, we could not spot a GIB but we learnt a lot about the probable causes of its dwindling numbers.

Firstly, a comment recently made by the Chairman of the Andhra Pradesh State Biodiversity Board in an interview, is revealing. "The Great Indian Bustard is one of the birds that has gone out of sight. The birds are heavy and are considered to be tasty. Hence the consequences of certain clandestine activities resulted in their extinction."

One of the locals, and an expert birder who saw a pair of GIBs last month, corroborated this by saying that the GIB's meat, being delicious, went counter to its own survival. Its numbers dwindled because it ended up on umpteen dining tables.

Another cause could have been the crop change pattern. The Blackbuck, multiplying as it does in fast-forward mode, is seen by the local farmer as a notorious crop raider. As the Blackbuck would often destroy the groundnut crop, many farmers were forced to switch crops. Unfortunately, crops which grow taller than the groundnut don't suit the GIB, because it cannot see the predator and hence, does not have enough reaction time to take off when it senses danger. The GIB is also deprived of those particular insects as are found around groundnuts, which also form part of its diet. So, not only does the GIB become food for others, it also loses out on some of its own diet. Though the locals at Rollapadu say that there is no dearth of the GIB's diet – which, besides groundnut, apparently consists of *Zizyphus* berries, Indian Mulberry (*Morinda tintoria*, local name *Maddi chettu),* Green Gram, Monitor Lizards and Scorpions - the degradation of its habitat could account for the dwindling numbers of GIB.


Blackbuck (Male) (Photos: Prashant Kumar)

The Blackbuck male is a visual treat. The most striking feature is the pair of spiralling horns, marked with rings, that angle proudly backwards from the head in a perfect V. A rich dark-brown back and pale underparts makes for a lovely contrast in colour. Overall, a superb visual.

Once, the Blackbuck declined owing to excessive hunting. Later, though the royal sport (read, senseless killing) was banned, farmers in the expanding areas of cultivation still saw it as a crop raider, leading to its further decline. Eventually, in the 1970s, when several areas reported its extinction, it was listed as a protected animal under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. The remaining populations are under threat from inbreeding. The natural habitat of the Blackbuck is being encroached upon by man's need for arable land and grazing grounds for domesticated cattle; exposure to the latter also exposes the Blackbuck to bovine diseases.

However, we saw countless Blackbuck in Rollapadu. As it has no predator, its numbers tend to increase rapidly. One solution would be to translocate them, yes, but if their numbers proliferate in every sanctuary, then what does one do? Catch-22!

Photo: Sharada Annamaraju

The GIB and Blackbuck, being open country grassland species, have in a way lost the battle because wherever there is open land there is man, who loses no time in getting down to either cultivation or construction, thus further degrading the habitat. Have you noticed how, in a human-animal conflict, the animal is always the loser? Very stark and very no-go situation this.

Photo: Prashant Kumar

Coming to the birds!

One of our birders spotted two birds, in the distance beyond the fields, alighting on something. A closer look revealed them to be Red-necked falcons (*Falco chicquera*). The beauty and colours on the Red-necked Falcon, with its distinct rufous head and grey body, are mesmerising to say the least. Red-necked Falcons are known to hunt in pairs. One chases while the other cuts off escape. Mutual cooperation in food gathering appears to be a great idea which these falcons seem to have perfected.

Red-necked Falcon
(Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

Next came the King of Camouflage - the Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (*Pterocles exustus). Pteron* means 'wing', *kles* means 'endowed with' and *exustus* means 'burnt' or 'scorched' - reference to the dark brown underbelly which appears scorched. Its nest is a simple scrape in the ground, holding three eggs per clutch with both the male and female incubating the eggs. The chicks are active from hatching, foraging for food with the adult birds, though they are unable to fly large distances and hence must rely on the adults for water. At a water hole, the adult birds soak up water in their breast feathers before returning to the nest to 'drizzle' upon the chicks. This is a unique feature of the Sandgrouse family.

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

The Yellow-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus malabaricus)* was another great sighting, declared the group happily over coffee in the evening. The splash of yellow wattle and legs, dark cap, white supercilium and dark breast band were clearly visible. The wattle looked like thick yellow clay shaped into a huge moustache and stuck on the bird! If I may be allowed to say so in good humour, without angering the wattle wearer, it looked incongruous!

Yellow-wattled Lapwing (Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

Eurasian Collared Dove (Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

Eurasian Collared Doves *(Streptopelia decaocto)* were also aplenty in Rollapadu.

Like all birders, we were keen to see nightjars, so we went out at night looking for them, and we were not disappointed. There it was - the Indian Nightjar *(Caprimulgus asiaticus)* - sitting right in the middle of the road, looking legless! Although it is a master camouflager, the bold plumage can give it away, so to speak.

Indian Nightjar (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

Southern Grey Shrike (Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

The Southern Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis*) made a pretty picture with its grey and black colour combination. *Lanius* is Latin means 'executioner' or 'butcher'. Shrikes are known as 'butcher birds', due to its habit of impaling its prey on thorns, sharp twigs, spikes or barbs. We didn't see the butchering happen, but we saw the bird itself several times, to our sheer delight. It perches low on dry thorny bushes hence visibility is that much better. Need I say that it is a photographer's delight?

Indian Courser (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

We saw the Indian Courser (*Cursorius coromandelicus)*, a widespread resident that dwells in arid habitat. It runs in spurts on the ground and takes to flight with a hoarse creaky '*gwaat gwaat*' call. The flight is strong with rapid wing beats. It flies low and does a short run after landing too. It is a ground bird, usually found in small groups, foraging for insects in dry, open, semi-desert country.

Rollapadu has distinctly red soil. Rocks coloured a beautiful pinkish-purple abound here, indicative of their manganese content; massive flat and layered mounds of these rocks along the edge of the canal made a very pretty picture. There are also many mustard-yellow rocks which contain chromium.

Greater Flamingo (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

We walked along a bund, which had the canal on our left and the reservoir on our right. Good birding happened here on the bund. A small group of Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*), a Eurasian Thick-knee (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) in flight, a Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) and a Darter (*Anhinga rufa*) drying his wings were the highlights here.

We tried our hand at fishing, but didn't catch any. On the way back from the bund we were presented with uncountable numbers of Baya Weavers (*Ploceus philippinus*), which looked like they had applied turmeric on their faces!

Baya Weaver (Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

There were flocks of Red Avadavats or Red Munias (*Amandava amandava*) and Indian Silverbills (*Lonchura malabarica*) too. They were all feeding on the maize crop. Brilliant colours found in large numbers - what else does a birder want? We also spotted a Jacobin's Cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*) here.

Jacobin's Cuckoo (Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

Red Avadavat and Indian Silverbill (Photo: Prashant Kumar)

A triangular face, very pointed ears, an elongated rostrum, is digitigrades (meaning, 'walks on its toes'), is an omnivorous and opportunistic feeder and comes with a beautiful bushy tail. What did I just describe? A fox. Our guide promised to show us a fox and he kept his promise. Not once but twice. Although we saw them in running or dashing mode both the times, it really felt good to see a fox, of whose cunning we all learn in kindergarten itself. However, as we grow up, we shed the dislike we had developed for it as children, due to its being perceived as a symbol or epitome of cunning, and comprehend that it is just playing its role in the scheme of things as dictated by Nature, whose unenviable job it is to maintain the ecological balance.

Indian Fox (Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

When a powerful predator hunts, it does not necessarily get to eat its whole kill. Foxes, vultures and hyenas are known to steal some of it on the sly. We come to understand that this is nature's way of feeding all creatures. Besides, if every creature hunts, who then will scavenge the carrion?

Coming to the museum in the Forest Guest House, the audio recordings of calls of resident birds were made available at the press of a button. A very innovative and informative display. It also contained life-sized models of birds and plenty of bird and animal images. The museum also housed an auditorium, where we were shown a film on the Tigers of Nagarjunasagar Srisailam Tiger Reserve.

The time spent at our Guest House was made more pleasant by the staff present. An excellent resident bird guide since many years, gentle and soft-spoken Adiseshaiah, whose name is found on the stone plaque in the Guest House, doubled up as a cook for us. We would dial up our appetites in consonance with his admirable culinary skills. Our keen and sincere guide Ghafoor pointed out many a denizen of the forest to us. Our grateful thanks to fabulous Adiseshaiah and Ghafoor. May your tribe increase!

Matters would be incomplete without presenting our appreciation and gratitude to the wonderful organiser of our field trips - Shafaat Ulla *saab*. If Rollapadu was a totally hitch-free and thoroughly enjoyable trip, it was all thanks to Shafaatsaab for his proactive organisational skills and excellent temperament.

Our whole group cannot help but thank our three outstanding *rathasaradhis,* Haragopal, Prashant Kumar and Gowthama for tirelessly driving us around right from Punjagutta to Rollapadu and back. Automobile engines revved and purred while negotiating some smooth, tough, slushy and ditch-filled terrain under their expert hands. Our sincere gratitude for their unfailing graciousness during the 600-km round-trip. Thank you Haragopal, Prashant and Gowthama.

To sum up, every morning, afternoon and evening, we would troop into the sanctuary and literally inhale its sights, sounds and smells, drink in the beauty of the lakes, trees and fauna, as if to load it all up and retrieve it for relaxation when we return to our cacophonous concrete jungles.

After reading this trip report, if you did not perceive that Rollapadu was a hyper-vibrant and priceless birding experience, then I guess I need to improve my writing skills!

Bird's eye view! (Photo: Sharada Annamaraju)

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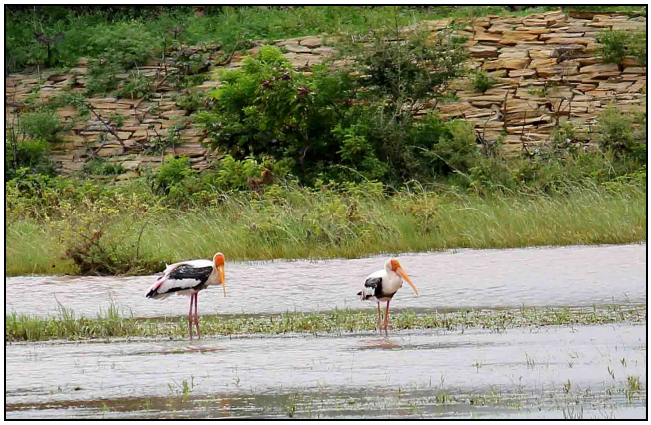
Some other birds, and other scenes, at Rollapadu:

Jungle Bush Quail (Photo: Prashant Kumar)



Painted Stork (Photo: Prashant Kumar)

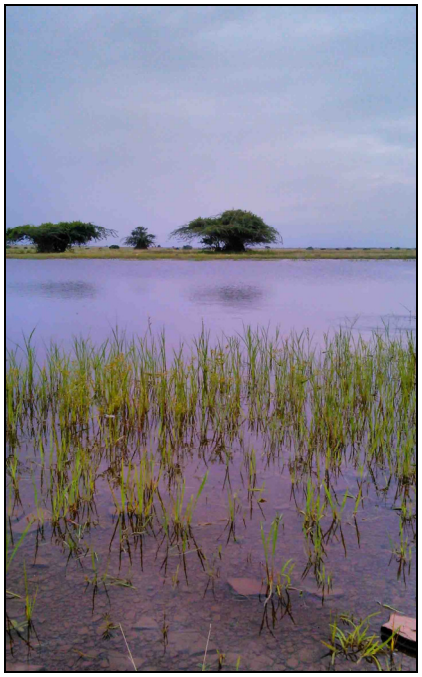


Photo: Sharada Annamaraju

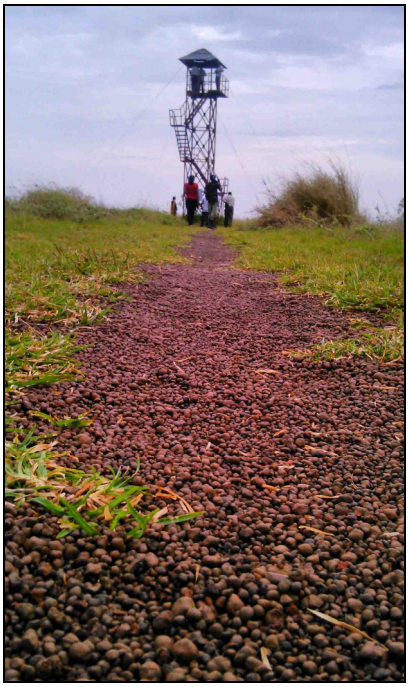


Photo: Sharada Annamaraju

Large Grey Babbler
(Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

Black-shouldered Kite with prey (Photo: Prashant Kumar)

Pied Kingfisher hovering (Photo: Prashant Kumar)

Grey Francolin (Photo: Prashant Kumar)

Pied Bushchat
(Photo: Sathvik Reddy Nimma)

A Jewel Beetle (Photo: Sharada Annamaraju)

List of birds seen at Rollapadu:

Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name
1.	Red Avadavat	*Amandava amandava*
2.	Jungle Babbler	*Turdoides striata*
3.	Large Grey Babbler	*Turdoides malcolmi*
4.	Yellow-billed Babbler	*Turdoides affinis*
5.	Coppersmith Barbet	*Megalaima haemacephala*
6.	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*
7.	Blue-tailed Bee-eater	*Merops philippinus*
8.	Pied Bushchat	*Saxicola caprata bicolor*
9.	Oriental Honey Buzzard	*Pernis ptilorhyncus*
10.	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*
11.	Common Coot	*Fulica atra*
12.	Little Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax niger*
13.	Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*
14.	Southern Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*
15.	Indian Courser	*Cursorius coromandelicus*
16.	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
17.	Jacobin Cuckoo (Pied Cuckoo)	*Clamator jacobinus*
18.	Common Hawk Cuckoo	*Hierococcyx varius*
19.	Darter	*Anhinga melanogaster*
20.	Spotted Dove	*Streptopelia chinensis*
21.	Laughing Dove	*Streptopelia senegalensis*
22.	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*
23.	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
24.	Indian Spot-billed Duck	*Anas poecilorhyncha*
25.	Bonelli's Eagle	*Hieraaetus fasciatus fasciatus*
26.	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*
27.	Large Egret	*Casmerodius albus*
28.	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*
29.	Greater Flamingo	*Phoenicopterus roseus*
30.	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*
31.	Little Grebe	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*
32.	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*
33.	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*
34.	Purple Heron	*Ardea purpurea*
35.	Common Hoopoe	*Upupa epops*
36.	Indian Grey Hornbill	*Ocyceros birostris*
37.	Black-headed Ibis (Oriental White Ibis)	*Threskiornis melanocephalus*
38.	Glossy Ibis	*Plegadis falcinellus*
39.	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*
40.	Pied Kingfisher	*Ceryle rudis*
41.	White-Breasted Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*
42.	Black-winged Kite (Black-shouldered Kite)	*Elanus caeruleus*
43.	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*
44.	Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark	*Eremopterix griseus*
45.	Greater Short-toed Lark	*Calandrella brachydactyla*
46.	Sykes's Lark	*Galerida deva*
47.	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*
48.	Yellow-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus malabaricus*
49.	Indian Nightjar	*Caprimulgus asiaticus*
50.	Common Moorhen	*Gallinula chloropus*

51.	Purple Swamphen	*Porphyrio porphyrio*
52.	Black-headed Munia	*Lonchura malacca*
53.	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
54.	Asian Openbill	*Anastomus oscitans*
55.	Indian Golden Oriole	*Oriolus (Oriolus) kundoo*
56.	Spotted Owlet	*Athene brama*
57.	Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*
58.	Blue Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*
59.	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*
60.	Kentish Plover	*Charadrius alexandrinus*
61.	Little Ringed Plover	*Charadrius dubius*
62.	Jungle Bush Quail	*Perdicula asiatica*
63.	Indian Robin	*Saxicoloides fulicatus*
64.	Indian Roller	*Coracias benghalensis*
65.	Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse	*Pterocles exustus*
66.	Common Greenshank	*Tringa nebularia*
67.	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*
68.	Southern Grey Shrike	*Lanius meridionalis*
69.	Indian Silverbill	*Euodice malabarica*
70.	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*
71.	Brahminy Starling	*Sturnus pagodarum*
72.	Painted Stork	*Mycteria leucocephala*
73.	Black-winged Stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*
74.	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*
75.	Red-rumped Swallow	*Hirundo daurica*
76.	Asian Palm Swift	*Cypsiurus balasiensis*
77.	Little Swift (House Swift)	*Apus affinis*
78.	River Tern	*Sterna aurantia*
79.	Whiskered Tern	*Chlidonias hybrida*
80.	Eurasian Thick-knee	*Burhinus oedicnemus*
81.	White-browed Wagtail	*Motacilla maderaspatensis*
82.	Yellow Wagtail	*Motacilla flava*
83.	Baya Weaver	*Ploceus philippinus*
84.	Lesser Whistling-duck	*Dendrocygna javanica*